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ABSTRACT

The study of causal attributions at the interpersonal level has been an integral part of attribution research. Unfortunately most attribution research has involved persons unfamiliar with each other. The marital relationship is an example of the need for understanding causal attributions among intimates. A striking feature of marital interaction is its reciprocal nature; relationship problems can occur when partners justify their own behavior in response to the other's prior behavior. Causal attributions can play a functional role in a real life relationship, as opposed to a laboratory situation, because there are usually a number of plausible causes for an event. Research has suggested that causal dimensions different from those traditionally used in individually oriented research may be important in studying intimates. A second issue raised concerning the preventative role of causal attributions in intimate conflict is that causal attributions, as accounts which bridge the gap between expectation and action, suggest various points of possible relationship malfunction. It appears that research on responsibility attribution is more relevant to relationship dysfunction than the study of perceived causality as traditionally conceived. When couples in therapy present problems where causal attributions are central, one needs to focus not only on the attributions themselves but on the expectations that make them so important. (JAC)

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CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS IN RELATIONSHIP DYSFUNCTION: A REEXAMINATION

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Causal attributions in relationship
dysfunction: A reexamination

The study of causal attributions at the interpersonal level has been an integral part of attribution research. One might therefore expect to find a rich source of information which is potentially useful in understanding the role of causal attributions in interpersonal problems. Unfortunately, most attribution research has involved persons who are unfamiliar with each other. Research which is portrayed as interpersonal most often adopts an individualistic, intrapersonal perspective which fails to capture the dynamic nature of truelly interpersonal phenomena. The therapeutic utility of such attribution research is therefore, at best limited to client problems which involve difficulties relating to persons with whom the client is minimally acquainted (e.g., social anxiety, shyness, etc.). When an understanding of intimate relationships is sought this source of data is not particularly useful.

Recently, however, a spate of studies (e.g., Doherty, 1982; Harvey et al., 1978; Newman & Langer, 1981; Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981; Orvis et al., 1976; Passer et al., 1978 Sillars, 1981; Thompson & Kelley, 1981) and theoretical statements (e.g., Kelley, 1979; Newman, 1981a,b; Newman & Langer, in press) have examined attributions in close relationships. Marital and family therapists have been quick to note its implications for their clinical work (e.g., Arias, 1982; Baucom, 1981; Doherty, 1981a,b; Hotaling, 1980). Indeed, Baucom (1981) has already begun to teach maritally distressed couples how to use the coveriation principle (Kelley, 1967) in making causal attributions as part of his therapeutic intervention.

Unfortunately, not enough attention has been given in the above writings to the nature of close relationships and the consequent implications for

understanding causal attributions among intimates. Several researchers have simply extrapolated ideas which have proved useful at the intrapersonal level to interpersonal problems. For example, Doherty (1981a) offers an analysis in which he relates interpersonal conflict to attributions made along specific causal dimensions. The model presupposes a highly rational attributor and adopts an individualistic perspective. Consequently, the dynamic nature of interpersonal attributions and their functional role in relationships is once again overlooked. In view of the lack of attention given to the nature of intimate relationships several of their salient features are examined in this paper. The implications for causal attributions are also spelt out. The marital relationship is used to illustrate the ensuing arguments.

A striking feature of marital interaction is its reciprocal nature. A given behavior by partner A is simultaneously a stimulus (insofar as it is followed by a behavior by partner B) and a response (insofar as it follows an action by B) in an uninterrupted chain of interchanges. Each behavior carries implications for the relationship and hence it is important to determine the causes of the other person's behavior (Orvis et al., 1976; Newman & Langer, in press). This poses a dilemma. Where does one begin the causal anlaysis? Orvis et al. (1976) were confronted with this problem when they found that subjects sometimes related a causal sequence in reporting events for which they and their partners had different explanations. They chose to code only the most immediate cause and hence, like most social psychologists, neglected the issue of causal chains in examining phenomenal causality (see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Fincham & Schultz, 1981).

Clearly there is no objectively correct solution to the above problem as any attempt to impose a linear cause-effect structure on intimate inter-

actions is arbitrary. This does not imply that such structures are alien to partners' perceptions of their relationships nor does it suggest that rules for imposing such structures do not exist. On the contrary, communication theorists have long recognized that the segmentation or "punctuation" of interaction organizes behavior and is therefore vital to it (Watzlawick et al, 1967). They argue that relationship problems can occur due to "faulty punctuation" where each partner justifies his/her behavior as a response to the other's prior behavior (e.g., wife nags...husband withdraws..wife nags...husband withdraws etc.). The extent to which causal connections are traced can thus be critical and may differentiate distressed from nondistressed relationships. Consider the case of Mr. Z who tells his wife at the breakfast table that he will be home late from work because of a prior assignment which has to be prepared for tomorrow's deadline. Mrs. Z may either console her husband and sympathize with him regarding work pressures or she may berate him for not having worked harder in the preceeding days and believe that his "inaction" denotes his lack of care for her or the relationship. The happily married Mrs. Z will most likely choose the former action whereas the maritally distressed Mrs. Z is likely to choose the latter.

The above example illustrates how causal attributions can often play a functional role in the relationship. This is possible because in real life, as oppossed to the typical laboratory situation, there are usually a number of plausible causes for an event even after a rigorous covariance analysis. Hence it is not surprising that partners in a relationship can offer equally plausible yet widely disparate explanations for sources of conflict between them (Orvis et al., 1976). Recognition of the functional

role of causal attributions means that in dealing with relationship problems one is faced with the task of replacing a set of causal perceptions which are instrumental in maintaining the problem with an alternative set which will be functional for the indiviudal/couple to overcome their problem. One is not engaged in helping the client to seek veridical causes but rather in altering the perceived plausibility of alternative causes. Hence the utility of traditional attribution formulations (e.g., Kelley, 1967) which rest on normative models is open to question.

The functional nature of causal attributions is recognized, albeit implicitly, by therapists of differing orientations. Systems theorists (e.g., Minuchin, 1974; Watzlawick et al., 1974) argue that a couple/family's problem is shaped by the contextual frame within which it is perceived. The technique of "reframing", while not couched in attribution terms, in effect constitutes a form of reattribution which enhances a sense of mastery over the problem. Behavioral martial therapists (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979) are now also including relabelling (reattribution) of behavior in their therapeutic armamentarium. The use of the above strategies is predicated on the assumption that causal chains are important in relationship dysfunction and that their segmentation does not provide veridical attributions.

Recent data provide support for the above argument. In his investigation of conflict between roommates, Sillars (1981) found that punctuation differences or different segmentations of causal chains were common, especially among dissatisfied roommates. Lower satisfaction was also associated with blame directed towards the other person and stable causal attributions for the conflict. Both these factors suppressed conflict

resolution strategies that promoted mutually satisfying outcomes. However, the direction of the causality is not clear. Orvis et al. (1976) examined attributional conflict in young couples and found that subjects tend to given explanations of their partner's behavior which leads to conflict in terms of the personal properties (characteristics or attitudes) of their partner. On the other hand, the explanations given by the partner whose behavior is under consideration took the form of excuses or justifications. Similar results emerged when Passer et al. (1978) examined the meaning given to causes of negative interpersonal behavior. The attitude toward the partner was an important dimension for both actor and partner. The intentional-unintentional dimension also emerged in the actor condition and corresponded to the distinction between justifying and excusing conditions found by Orvis et al. (1976). A similar parallel in results occured in the partner condition as states versus actor's traits comprised the second dimension. Two major implications of these results are noteworthy in the present context. First, the fact that attitude towards the partner was a dimension for both actor and partner conditions suggests that distressed and nondistressed spouses should differ in the causal attributions they make for both their own and their spouse's behavior. Second, to the extent that the provision of justifications or excuses (accounts) prevents conflict by "verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation" (Lyman & Scott, 1970, p. 112) this process is likely to have broken down in distressed relationships.

Fincham and O'Leary (1982) investigated the first of the above implications which is strongly emphasized in theoretical writings (Epstein,

1982; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Couples seeking marital therapy were compared to a nondistressed control group in terms of the dimensions underlying their perceived causes of spouse behavior (spouse-external to spouse, global-specific, stable-unstable, controllable-uncontrollable). The results showed that distressed spouses considered the causes of negative spouse behavior to be more global than nondistressed spouses while the inverse pattern obtained for positive behavior. The other difference found involved perceived controlability - distressed spouses considered the causes of positive behavior to be more uncontrollable than nondistressed spouses. Only partial evidence was therefore obtained to suggest that distressed and nondistressed couples differ in the causal inferences they make for spouse behavior.

One obvious implication of this funding is that causal dimensions different from those traditionally used in individually oriented research may be important in studying intimates. Research is currently being conducted to examine this hypothesis. In addition, Newman (1981a,b) has emphasized an interpersonal attribution category to supplement the dispositional and situational categories which have dominated research. Interpersonal attributions focus on "one's perception of 'self in regard to other' and 'other in regard to self'" (Newman, 1981a, p. 63). However, this still leaves on imcomplete picture. For example, attributions which identify the relationship as cause and point to the interactive or transactional process need to be examined. Even though Orvis et al. (1976) found little evidence for such attributions, their importance is emphasized by the fact that they play an integral part in therapy and have been identified as a necessary component of behavior change (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979).

The second issue raised concerning the preventative role of causal attributions in intimate conflict, has not been investigated in distressed and nondistressed couples. The view of causal attributions as accounts which bridge the gap between expectation and action suggests various points of possible relationship malfunction. First, the problem may lie at the level of partner expectation due to unrealistic or irrational beliefs. In fact, Geiss and O'Leary (1981) found that marital and family therapists report unrealistic expectations as the second most frequent cause of marital distress and they are moreover, negatively associated with improvement in therapy (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Rational restructuring (Ellis & Greiger, 1977) concerning partner beliefs is an appropriate intervention in this case. Second, the degree of divergence in the causal perceptions of actor and partner may be so large that any attempt to provide an account becomes futile and may result in conflict (Sillars, 1981). Such differences can arise from a variety of sources (e.g., punctuation differences, behavior incompatiable with the account etc.) and therefore several strategies may be appropriate as intervertions (e.g., role play of each others positions, explicitly examining the transcational process, behavior change etc.). Third, relationship goals may be at variance with current accounts (e.g., partner may want to separate while actor's account, if accepted, would imply continuation of the relationship). Fourth, either the individual and/or relationship may be entering a different developmental stage which requires a change in the level of explanation (e.g., reduced interpersonal involvement or crises may require more elaborate accounts). Other possibilities exist and clearly research is needed to examine differences between satisfactory and distressed relationships.

When causal attributions among intimates are considered from the viewpoint of accounts as portrayed above, it becomes obvious that one is not dealing simply with perceived causality but also with expectations which infuse the causal perceptions with their meaning and evaluative content. The expectation component has been implicitly assumed in previous writings (e.g., Orvis et al., 1976) and may explain why causal attributions are often equated with perceived blame. Given a set of expectations regarding reasonable behavior (often shared by reader and writer, client and therapist) a partner-directed causal attribution can amount to a charge which requires rebuttal. For example, a distressed spouse expecting their partner to come home at a particular time might on their late arrival say, "You're late because you really don't care about your family". This causal attribution is likely to evoke a rebuttal as it does not simply represent a description of causally related variables.

From this analysis it is apparent that research on responsibility attribution is more relevant to relationship dysfunction than the study of perceived causality as traditionally conceived in the attribution literature. The quintessence of responsibility is answerability or accountability (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980). Hence responsibilities can only exist in relation to concommitant duties and need not even involve causal connections. Even the various meanings of responsibility might prove useful in this respect. For example, the fact that one can only be held responsible when certain mental criteria are met (capacity responsibility) finds its analogue in close relationships in the situation where a partner lacks the requisite skills required to meet his/her partner's expectations (e.g., to be intimate, communicate freely).

The above analysis has important implications for both therapy and research. When couples in therapy present with problems where causal attributions are central one needs to focus not only on the attributions themselves but the expectations which make them so important. These may be implicit and not apparent to the couple or they may be explicit. For some distressed couples a lack of awareness regarding partner expectations may be the root of their problems (e.g., partner is expected to infer one's feelings so that when this does not occur it is seen as a lack of caring; that disagreement is necessarily destructive and hence when one's partner does disagree it indicates their desire to erode the relationship etc.) In sum, the therapist may wish to focus on expectations, attributions or both depending on the circumstances of the case.

As regards research implications, there is an obvious need to examine forms of explanation or accounts which are not given in terms of perceived causality but which nonetheless serve the same functional role as causal attributions (Antaki, 1981). Causal attributions, when verbalised, contitute behaviors which might profitably be examined by standard behavioral assessment techniques. For instance, a functional analysis where the immediate stimuli preceding the verbalization of an attribution and its consequences are systematically monitored, would elucidate the conditions under which causal attributions are articulated and show how they are shaped by social interaction (see Kidd & Amabile, 1981). Such procedures have also been underutilized in cognitive therapy with couples.

The functional nature of causal attributions is most apparent when they constitute part of the relationship dialogue. Attributions as

verbalized communications between partners have been discussed elsewhere (see Newman, 1981b; Newman & Langer, in press, Orvis et al, 1976). However, it is worth noting that many causal attributions remain unarticulated in a relationship and that this in itself can lead to relationship problems. For example, even though there is evidence to suggest that persons act as hypothesis testers in generating causal attributions (Snyder & Gangestad, 1981) partners in a close relationship may make causal attributions about each other and not mention or test these precisely because of their familiarity with the other person. Alternatively, this may occur because it is functional for the perceiver at the intrapersonal, evaluative level. For example, when a partner makes an important relationship decision or experiences a strong emotion they may selectively infer positive or negative causes for the other's behavior to justify their decision/feeling. Such a process is likely to be particularly important during relationship termination (Newman & Langer, in press). Thus the goals of the partners in the relationship need to be carefully considered when analysing the causal inferences they make.

Implicit and untested causal attributions are perhaps most deleterious when the partner's behavior is perceived as significant in relation to self when, in fact, it may merely reflect the partner's idiosyncracies or own intrapersonal problems. Newman and Langer (in press) suggest that this "attribution error" is as fundamental as the traditional tendency to favor dispositional attributions over situational ones. Inferring such behaviors as having communicative or interactive importance is particularly likely to occur in distressed relationships characterized by conflict and hence therapists should be sensitive to this phenomenon.

The impression given by attribution research in the laboratory suggests an active processor continually analyzing and explaining behavior. This to does not capture what happens in intimate relationships. Spouses are likely to build a "schema" or script regarding their relationship and process self and partner behavior within this schema in the same way that individuals process incoming information in terms of their self schema (Markus, 1977). Such processing is likely to occur at an automatic, less mindful level and can potentially involve a great deal of distortion. Perhaps the most important therapeutic implication concerns positive behavioral changes brought about in therapy. To maintain such gains the therapist should ensure that the couple process these changes in an adaptive manner lest they assimilate them to an existant (malfunctional) schema and/or discount them. For example, a partner's change should be attributed to factors such as their own effort or changed feelings and not to a belief that the couple are only responsive to each other during crises (relationship schema), the therapist's intervention or a behavioral contract (discounting). It naturally follows that every appropriate opportunity should be used to have clients process interaction in the service of building a new, positive relationship schema. The issues of partner and relationship schemata and of mindful versus mindless attribution are likely to be critical in understanding relationship dysfunction and await research.

In sum, it is apparent that in close relationships causal attributions are not the logical products portrayed by attribution theorists. On the contrary, they are part of the fabric of the relationship alterning and being altered by its course. Thus causal attributions should be viewed as functional to the relationship and they may serve to help maintain or terminate it. At times they constitute part of the discourse of the relationship

and in this respect constitute one of several forms of explanation. However, they can also remain unarticulated and can be made with differing degrees of mindfulness. In any event, their potence derives from expectations which are discrepant with behavior, a fact which tends to have been overlooked. Consequently, the process of responsibility attribution models causal attributions in close relationships more veridically than traditional research on perceived causality. It seems then that the simple extension of work at the individualistic, intrapersonal level is limited when an understanding of causal attributions in intimate relationships is sought. However, attribution theory has the potential to offer a fresh perspective in studying dysfunction in intimate relationships and new models of the attribution process which address the issues raised in this paper will enhance even further, our understanding of such interpersonal problems.

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